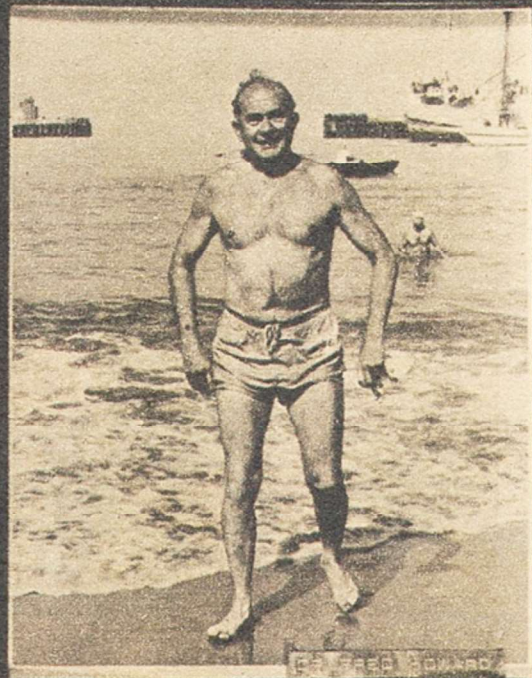


Remembering The Longest Swim

By Kevin Nelson



Stu Evans (top left), Ted Erikson (top right), Dr. Fred Howard (lower left) and Ike Papke.

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Courtesy Dolphin Club



Stu Evans (top left), Ted Erikson (top right), Dr. Fred Howard (lower left) and Ike Papke.

"Maybe fifteen people tried the Farallon Islands to mainland swim before Stu Evans made it in 1967."

■ Upstairs at the Dolphin Club, Jim Vanya gazed out the broad picture window across San Francisco Bay. It was a clear, windy day. Amidst a group of other club members gathered about the Frank Staib Room, Vanya was absorbed in the view. Below him, the orange fluorescent caps of swimmers bobbed in the fifty-five-degree waters of Aquatic Park. A Dolphin for almost half of his fifty years, Vanya was trying to remember something.

"Even now," said Vanya in his soft Yugoslavian accent, "it is hard to believe that Stu Evans swam twenty-six miles from the Farallon Islands to the mainland. Many of us swim in the Bay. But the ocean is different. When you are out there, you see nothing. No mountains, no land. It is just you and the water. You feel like an ant. It takes courage to face that."

Wrapped in his own thoughts, Frank Drum listened to the muffled sound of waves breaking on the beach. A retired longshoreman, Drum was president of the Dolphins. Usually there was plenty of bawdy laughter around the clubhouse. That's the way he liked it. But he could understand Vanya's mood, especially today.

The walls of the Frank Staib Room were covered with the photographs, trophies and records of the Dolphin past. Staib himself had been a member for forty-seven years, Drum remembered. There was a photo of Jack LaLanne, standing with the Dolphins who helped him make his sixtieth birthday swim. His wrists and feet tied, LaLanne had towed a rowboat, filled with 1,000 pounds of sandbags, from Alcatraz to the Wharf. And grizzly bearded George Kiskaddon, founder of the Oceanic Society, was up there, alongside a young Lawton Hughes. Hughes, the club treasurer, had won the annual Golden Gate Channel Swim six times, beginning in 1919. After its origin a century ago, the club periodically took group pictures of members and their families. Their faces ranged along the walls, too. Inside the cluttered trophy case, Drum noticed a silver cup with a figurine of a swimmer perched on top. Its dusty inscription read, "World's First Farallon Islands to Mainland Swim, Lieutenant Colonel Stewart Evans."

"Thirteen hours, forty-four minutes and fifty-two seconds," said Drum. "Maybe fifteen people tried before Stu made it in 1967. Ray Carnassi. Myra Thompson and Lenore Modell, both teenagers. Touffie Blaik. Ted Erikson, the first American to swim the English Channel back and forth. Ted tried the Farallones twice. Ike Papke tried twice."

"But Papke almost made it that first time. He was about a mile from Stinson Beach and we had to pull him out. He'd been swimming for fifteen hours. He'd completely tightened up. Doc Howard jumped in next to him and said his breath smelt like sour milk. That meant Ike was burning up muscle tissue. Not body reserves, not fat, his own muscle tissue."

Like Drum, many of the older Dolphins had participated in a Farallones swim. George DeGear, with his wife Fran, were onshore timers for Evans. Aldo Cuneo had paddleboarded next to Papke. Jerry Hawryluk had organized the 1956 group race. Each had his own story. Yet there were disputes over details.

as events had become clouded over the years.

"Stu lucked out," chirped Rudy De May, an electrician who swam besides Evans as a pacer. "He happened to hit it just right. No wind. No chop. When it begins to chop out there, no one can handle it. And you guys know how fast the tides can change. You can be swimming in from Alcatraz and be aiming for the Hyde Street Pier and if you guess wrong, the tides can come up and sweep you down to the Ferry Building."

Bill Walden had been standing aloof outside the doorway. A short, sturdy man, he had worked and lived his entire life outdoors. Walden thought of his rowing buddy, Eddie DeCossio. Two years ago, Walden and DeCossio had rowed from Aquatic Park to Sacramento. In a handmade seventeen-foot whitehall, they traveled for four days up the sloughs and Sacramento River. On the last day, they rowed eleven consecutive hours. At the time, Walden was fifty-five. DeCossio, who has rowed the 100-mile stretch many times, was seventy.

"You're right, Rudy," Walden said, his deep voice booming across the room, "but there's more. I know you understand. Let me say it anyway. Stu wasn't arrogant or egotistical. He was dedicated to achieving this one thing. I think it was his way to express what man is capable of."

"Nothing," intoned Jim Vanya, who had been ignoring the previous conversation. "There was nothing. We were in our boats for Papke's swim and the fog dropped. All of a sudden you couldn't even see your hand in front of your face. Papke was in the water. We lost sight of him. We didn't know where anyone else was. We yelled. I thought for sure we would lose."

"Hey, ladies," interrupted a smiling Joe Bruno, who had just walked in from a swim. "What's going on here? Looks like a damn Geritol commercial."

At Bruno's appearance, the spell was broken. Bruno still wore his swimsuit and a drop of water hung from his goatbe. The group was glad to see him. Jokes were made about Bruno's paunch. He responded feistily. A few Dolphins escaped to the locker room to change clothes for their daily swim. Others filed out the hallway to the sun deck below. Everyone was relieved to have the club back to normal.

Reluctant to leave, Frank Drum lingered behind. A black and white photograph of Evans hung on the far wall. Drum studied it. Evans wore a dark suit and a thin black tie. His hair was cut short, Army-style. He was smiling broadly. At forty-one, on top of the world, Evans was holding a trophy.

"Damn," Drum muttered. "Stu's picture doesn't even have his name attached to it. If someone outside the club saw this picture, they wouldn't think anything of it. Like those group portraits of old Dolphins, he'd just be another empty face. All those oldtimers' experiences are gone. Stu's story, at least, ought to be saved."

On Sunday, August 27, 1967, Stu Evans stood on a boat off the bleak, rocky shores of South Farallon Island. He said a



Fred Rogers applies grease to Bert Capps. Rogers swam Lake Tahoe once.

prayer to himself. At 10:17 p.m., he launched backwards into the Pacific Ocean and began his swim for the coast.

Immediately, Evans was stung by jellyfish. He jerked his hands from the water. As the lights of the support craft enveloped him, the jellyfish seemed monstrous. Their tentacles appeared to stretch for thirty feet. Hovering just below the surface, their white, ghostly shapes blanketed the area. Stu was stung repeatedly. Welts marked his shoulders. The jellyfish were a horror, lasting over an hour, yet Evans swam steadily through them.

Stu was coated with marine bearing grease, mixed with graphite and shark repellent. In Polynesian folklore, the shark fears the giant squid. His repellent combined lard and squid juice. But Stu was hurting. The grease wouldn't allow him to sweat. And after awhile the numbing fifty-two-degree water came through. It was hours before Stu was able to urinate. At cold temperatures, Stu knew, his body slowed down. In fact, even protected by a wetsuit hood, it was just a matter of time before he stopped functioning altogether. He was in a race.

Evans felt good about his support. He had befriended Rita Banks, a strong, attractive woman who worked as a fashion consultant at I. Magnin. Banks was in the Coast Guard Auxiliary, which provided a forty-footer. There was also an Army boat, for years stationed in the Yacht Harbor at Fort Baker. On this boat were rowers, pacers, press, observers and Ace Polk. His antique rifle always in hand, Polk watched for sharks.

The Coast Guard cutter steamed ahead of Evans for a mile or two, while its partner hung back or to the side. Often they switched

positions, careful to keep engine fumes away from the swimmer. The course had been figured by Evans, other Dolphins and advisors from the Matson Navigation Company. It ran as straight as possible towards Stinson Beach. But local fishermen were along for guidance. Since ocean winds and currents can change quickly, firsthand knowledge was essential. Anything could happen.

At all times, there were two fourteen-foot rowboats in the water. Joe Weiss, sixty-six, was chief pilot. Up from his home in Santa Cruz, he pointed the direction and scouted for possible dangers, like crossing boats or floating debris. In 1955, along with Mark Graham, a former Recreation & Park swim instructor at the Mission Pool, Weiss had encouraged Ray Carmassi to attempt the Farallones by starting from Point Reyes. Touffie Blaik was next to attempt the swim. As Blaik jumped in at the start, someone tripped over a light cable and the whole area was plunged in darkness. Blaik, frantically yelling for help, was eventually found by Weiss. Now a distance ahead of Evans, there was a strong, clear light attached to the stern of Weiss' boat.

In the fog of early morning, Bill Walden timed his pull to coincide with Stu's stroke. Stu swam at a pace of fifty-five crawl strokes per minute. He breathed on his left side. Walden rowed the *Sydney Foster*, named for an old Sausalito marina captain. He kept the blade of his starboard oar just ahead of Evans.

Don Wardo was the feeder. From the Farallones, refusing to be relieved, he camped in the stern of the *Sydney Foster*. When Evans slowed to a breaststroke, Wardo passed a squeeze cup of Jello and 7-Up in front of him. According to international long distance swim-

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Nostalgia continued

*"Evans devoted his life to the swim.
Nothing compared to the Farallones."*

ming rules, no one could touch Evans, nor could he touch the boat. At times, it was frustrating for Warto. Stu was so completely alone.

Evans moved mechanically through the water, conserving his resources. He followed a course similar to Ike Papke's. On his first swim, Papke had joked with the women on the press boat. A cocky, All-City football player during high school, he had even laughingly taken bites of a roast chicken. Those lost, wasted minutes cost him. At the end, in sight of the bonfires waiting for him on shore, Papke was helpless.

Stu remembered other swimmers. Myra Thompson grew up in San Francisco and learned to swim at the old Crystal Plunge on Lombard and Taylor Streets. She won the 1956 Farallones race, beating Paul Herron and others, although she never touched shore. Lenore Modell was the youngest girl to swim the English Channel. She trained on the American River. Steadfastly she faced upstream, against the river's current, swimming in the same spot for hours. She missed twice. There was Ted Erikson, a strong, prodigious swimmer. He'd swim butterfly, backstroke, breast and freestyle. His kick could be seen from a distance, like a spouting whale, circling inside the curving pier of Aquatic Park. On his first attempt at the Farallones, Erikson quit after five hours. Two weeks later, he came back again. Swallowing saltwater in mouthfuls, he grew seasick. This time Erikson was pulled from the water, a beaten man.

Evans had devoted his life to finishing the swim. At nineteen, he joined the Army. He later swam the twenty-three miles of Catalina Channel and crossed the twelve miles of the Salton Sea. Just before Stu was transferred to duty at the Presidio, he won a medal for heroism. In eighty feet of water off the coast of Turkey, he scuba dived through broken concrete and jagged glass in search of the victims of a car crash. Visibility was three inches on the bottom. But there was no sense talking about the danger. That didn't get things done.

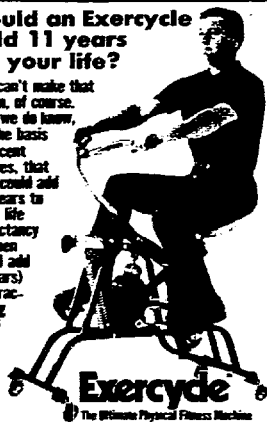
Stu trained seriously for a year before hand. He cut out booze, staying out late, parties. The English Channel had been done many times. Nothing compared to the Farallones. He made long practice swims. After tying their rowboat to a fishing trawler, Evans and some other Dolphins would ride to the San Francisco Lightship, sixteen miles away. The Dolphins rowed back, while Evans swam, in the main channel for ships entering the Golden Gate. At Ocean Beach, Stu usually tired and climbed aboard his escort. He swam along the waterfront to Candlestick Park, and beyond, to Coyote Point in San Mateo, twenty miles away. When the tides were right, he trained at Petaluma Creek, above San Rafael. He liked the smooth water, in contrast to the chopiness of the Bay, and he swam for miles up and down stream. He could not do enough to prepare for what lay ahead.

A sea lion bounded merrily by. Since three a.m., there had been swimmers in the water pacing him. Dressed in wetsuits and fins, the pacers rotated to stay fresh. After thirty minutes or so, Rudy De May

continued

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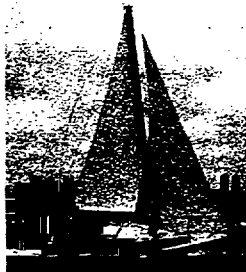
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Nostalgia continued

"Incredulously, Evans jogged wildly around the beach. Pauline was crying. Her husband, at last, could rest."

dropped off, picked up by a trailing boat. Dick Galton or Duncan McLeod quickly resumed Rudy's pace. They constantly exhorted Evans to greater effort.

"C'mon. You can do it. You've come so far. Quitting will hurt more. Keep going. You can do it."

Almost ten hours into the swim, Dr. Fred Howard jumped into the water. A longtime Dolphin, Howard was a urologist at Franklin Hospital. Stu was moving much slower. A sharp pain had developed in his shoulder. It was probably caused by strain, Howard figured, as well as the nagging jellyfish bites. An aspirin helped. On the swim back, Howard was jubilant. Stu was able to fight through the pain. Or maybe he accepted the pain as a fact of his greater effort. Howard thought Evans would complete the swim.

On board the Coast Guard cruiser, a decision was being made. The swells were rising. Stu was being pushed north by a strong tidal drift and his shoreward progress had slowed from 2.0 to 0.5 knots. Stinson Beach, the scheduled finish, was at least an hour away. Weiss and Hector Valencia rowed ahead and found a break north of Duxbury Reef, near Bolinas. The crew relaxed. The end was straight ahead. Abandoning prior plans, Evans would become the first person to swim from the Farallones to the continental United States.

Then someone yelled, "Shark!"

A twelve-foot blue shark crossed the boat's bow. Its fin was moving quickly and headed in Stu's direction. An alert was given, yet Ace Polk seemed very far away. Rita Banks watched and waited. Except for a bag of throwing rocks on the Sydney Foster, Stu was defenseless. Banks imagined the shark gliding beneath the water. Stu must be very tired, semi-conscious. His stroke was weaker. The shark passed.

Stu was in shallow water. On a cliff above the onlooking boats and people, Fran DeGear held the timer's gun. When Stu reached shore, her job was to signal Jack Gordon, the official timer. She caught her breath. Not long ago, she had been sipping coffee and feeding her birds at her home in the Marina. When KCBS reported that

Stu was a mere two miles from the coast, she hopped in her car and sped to Stinson. Upon recovering herself, she learned about the new landing spot. She chased again over the back roads of Marin and made it with minutes to spare.

There were only ten yards left. Stu rose to his feet. He toppled forward. George DeGear was nearby and ready to tackle anyone who tried to prematurely aid Evans. As in the previous twenty-six miles, almost fourteen hours of swimming, Stu was on his own.

The gun sounded. Incredulously, Evans jogged wildly around the beach. People tried to wrap him in blankets. In the ensuing confusion, he found his wife, Pauline. They kissed and embraced.

Pauline was crying. Her husband, at last, could rest.

Outside in the sun, the Dolphins scattered about the club. Dressed in work clothes, Jim Vanya peeled an orange on the bleached pier, badly in need of paint. A few women gingerly entered the water. They were training for their September swim of Hawaii's Maui Channel. Mike Garibaldi was in the weight room. He is the Club's best long distance ocean swimmer. In the shade, Bill Walden stood beneath the clock at the boathouse entrance.

"Once you do something like that," Walden said, still fixed on the earlier conversation, "nothing ever quite seems the same. Know what I mean, Frank? Stu swam it for everybody. For the whole human race. The achievement belongs to all of us."

Drum nodded. It hurt him, too. Stu Evans, at age fifty-two, had died of throat cancer.

"I was back in Indiana," said Drum, "when Stu made the swim. I heard the news over the radio so I called Ted Erikson up. After Stu, of course, Ted was able to come back and swim from the Farallones to the Golden Gate. But I'll never forget Ted's reaction. 'Stu made it,' he said. His voice was so full of hope and joy. 'Stu made it,' he kept saying, 'Stu made it.'"